The Eighth Duino Elegy
Rainer Maria Rilke

With full gaze the animal sees the open.
Only our eyes, as if reversed, are like snares
set around it, block the freedom of its going.
Only from the face of the beast do we know
what is outside; for even little children
we turn around and force them to look backward
at the world of forms, and they do not see the open
so deep in the animal’s eyes. Free from death.
Only we see that; but the beast is free
and has its death always behind it and God before it,
and when it walks it goes toward eternity,
as springs flow. Never, not for a single day
do we have pure space before us in which the flowers
are always unfolding. It’s forever world
and never Nowhere-without-Not:
the pure and unwatched-over air we breathe,
know infinitely and do not want. As when sometimes
a child gets lost in the silence
and has to be shaken back. Or someone dies and is it.
For nearing death, one sees death no more and stares forward,
perhaps with the wide gaze of the animal.
Lovers, were it not for the other who blocks the view,
are close to it and marvel...
as if by carelessness it is open to them
behind each other... but neither gets past, and again
it’s world. Always turned to creation, we see there
only the reflection of the free,
darkened by us. Or that a beast, a dumb one,
lifts his eyes and looks us calmly through and through.
That’s what Destiny is: to be face to face
and nothing but that and always opposite.

If the sure animal that approaches us
in a different direction had this awareness of ours,
he would drag us along behind him. But his existence
is infinite to him, ungrasped, without a glimpse
at his condition, pure as his outward gaze.
And where we see the future, he sees All
and himself in All and himself healed forever.
And yet within the warm and watchful creature
is the care and heaviness of a great melancholy.
For it also clings to him always, that
which often overcomes us--memory:
as if once before the thing for which we strive
had been closer, truer, and the relation
infinitely tender. Here all is distance,
there it was breath. After the first home
the second is hybrid and open to the winds.
Oh, the beatitude of the little creatures
that stay forever in the womb that conceived them;
oh, the joy of the midge that is still hopping within,
even during its nuptials: for womb is all.
And look at the half-certainty of the bird
that from its origin knows almost both;
as if it were the soul of a dead Etruscan
shut in the space where his effigy rests as a lid.
And how perturbed is anything come from a womb
when it has to fly! As if afraid of itself,
it jerks through the air, as a crack goes through a cup.
As the track of a bat tears through the porcelain of evening.

And we: onlookers, always, everywhere,
turned toward everything and never from!
We are surfeited. We set it in order. It breaks.
We put it in order again and break down ourselves.

Who has twisted us like this, so that--
no matter what we do--we have the bearing
of a man going away? As on the last hill
that shows him all his valley, for the last time,
he turns, stands still, and lingers, so we live,
forever saying farewell.

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